



## Young Feminist Men Finding their Way. On young Swedish Men's Experiences of and Orientations in Feminist Settings

By  
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### Abstract

Men and feminism is a contentious topic. In theoretical discussions as well as in previous studies, men and feminism have been described as an oxymoron, that being a man and a feminist is a border land position and that it entails experiences of so-called gender vertigo or gender limbo. Still, there are men who identify themselves as feminists and engage in feminist settings, parties and organizations. In this article, I aim to explore how masculinity is constructed and shaped within feminism. The article is based on qualitative interviews with nine young feminist men in Sweden. Using Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology and the concepts of disorientation and reorientation, I analyse how the interviewees experience themselves as men *and* feminists and how they navigate within their feminist settings. The analysis illustrates that in contrast to previous research, the interviewees articulate an assuredness in their position as men and feminists. However, being a man and a feminist is still a somewhat disorienting position that promotes reflexive journeys through which the interviewees seek to elaborate a sensitive, perceptive and "softer" masculinity. Feminism can be seen as a way of doing masculinity, and the ways in which the interviewees (re)orient themselves in their feminist settings can be understood as processes of masculinity construction. These reorientations position the interviewees in the background of their feminist settings, where they carry out what I call political housekeeping and men-feminism. From this position, they also adopt a perspective of a theoretical as well as temporal distance and articulate themselves as actors in the history of feminism. Thus, the article highlights that feminist men can seek out a masculinity that is positioned in the background yet still experience themselves as subjects in the feminist struggle.

**Keywords:** Men, masculinity, masculinities, feminism, queer phenomenology.

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## Introduction

Can men really be feminists? This is a question that has been asked and discussed ever since second wave feminism and the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s. It has also been an ongoing academic debate since the early 1980s (Bryson 1999; Conlin & Heesacker 2018). Mainly, the idea of men as feminists has been regarded as problematic. The political philosopher David Kahane, to name one example, has described men and feminism as an "oxymoron" (Kahane 1998. C.f. Heath 1989; Stoltenberg 1998, Johansson 2003). This problematic usually comes down to two arguments. The first is that as long as there are structural differences between men and women in society, men will receive a "patriarchal dividend" —a term coined by sociologist Raewyn Connell that stresses all men will always gain something from being male in an unequal society (Connell 1995: 79 & 2000: 46; also Kimmel 1998: 61-62). The second argument is that men can never really experience and understand the underlying foundations that have given birth to and nurture feminism because men are not women and lack women's experiences of subordination. Feminism then, due to both structural and experiential reasons, is often regarded as women's area (Egeberg Holmgren & Hearn 2009). Seen from this perspective, men can never really and fully be feminists. These arguments have, however, been criticised (e.g. hooks 2000; Ashe 2004; Tarrant 2009).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, ever since the initial women's movement in the 19th century, men have been engaged in the struggle for an equal society (Svanström & Östberg 2004). Thus, instead of asking if men really can be feminists, this article will contribute to previous studies by exploring in what ways men can be feminists and how feminist men experience themselves as such. The article's analytical focus is inspired by Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology: a theory placing queer subjects in the spotlight (Ahmed 2006). Phenomenology offers a perspective to explore the "life-worlds" of subjects and their "lived experiences", as well as how subjects act to shape themselves and their life-worlds in the world (Frykman & Gilje 2003: 15). By bringing "queer" into this vocabulary, Ahmed promotes an interest in the experiences and actions of subjects who deviate from the norm and experience themselves as strange or as "oxymoronic" rather than familiar. Using the concept of *orientation* in relation to queer subjects, Ahmed places questions of *disorientation* and *reorientation* at the centre. Disorientation pinpoints the feelings of losing the sense of who I am and how I should act in a specific context. Hence, disorientation is about feeling lost. Reorientation, on the other hand, is about trying out new directions, i.e. trying to find a way of getting past the feeling of being lost. Thus, as Ahmed herself puts it, queer phenomenology is concerned with experiences of "losing our way as well as finding our way" and how we come to "feel at home" in specific contexts and places (Ahmed 2006: 20, 7). In this article, I am focused on understanding if and how young men try to shake off

feelings of being oxymoronic and how they strive to feel at home as feminists. Hereby, I also seek to produce knowledge on how masculinity is constructed and shaped within feminism.

The methodological approach is influenced by ethnography and semi-structured life-story interviews (e.g. Davies 2008; James 2000). I have conducted interviews with nine young men, aged between 20 and 30 and engaged in feminist settings. Seven of them are members in political parties or youth parties. The remaining two (Ingemar and Bashir) are engaged in groups and organisations working for gender equality. In all of these settings, feminism is central. The criteria for selection were that the interviewees identified as men and were actively engaged in feminist settings. This resulted in interviewees with different political ideologies, from both the working- and the middle-class, as well as with different ethnic backgrounds (Bashir and Ghassan both have parents who immigrated to Sweden). These differences fill no explicit function in the article but exhibit a width in the empirical data. A social category that is of high relevance for the analysis, however, is that of age. The interviewees are in the same age spectrum and this had a significant effect on the interviews, as they talked about being shaped by a specific societal context and articulated themselves as belonging to a particular generation of feminist men. I will return to this in the analysis. When analysing, I consider the interviews as performative. Therefore, I study them as narrations of the interviewees' experiences as well as acts where the interviewees perform—and presumably tries to pass—as men *and* feminists (c.f. Egeberg Holmgren 2011).<sup>2</sup> The analysis is structured by Ahmed's concepts of disorientation and reorientation. Consequently, it begins with exploring if and how the interviewees have experienced disorientation in their feminist engagement. In the second part, I analyse how the interviewees reorient themselves in their feminist settings and highlight four different reorientations found in the interviews. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion on how feminism can be understood as a way of doing masculinity.

## Disorientation

Exploring if and how the interviewees have experienced disorientation as men *and* feminists, I start by asking how the interviewees experience themselves as *men* within feminism. Thereafter, we turn to questions of privilege and explore how the interviewees tackle the risk of getting disproportionate rewards for being feminist men. Lastly, I address how the interviewees talk about their feminist engagement as reflexive processes and how this affects the ways in which they are disoriented, or not.

*A 'Gender Limbo' or Assured Feminist Men?*

According to previous research, in which ambivalence and uncertainty have been recurring themes, being a man and a feminist seems to be disorienting (Egeberg Holmgren 2011; Tienary & Taylor 2018; Conlin & Heesacker 2018). Studies have emphasised that feminist men, due to their identification as feminists, often deal with doubts regarding their masculinity. To emphasise this, Raewyn Connell (1995) coined the term “gender vertigo” and the sociologist Anna Hedenus (2005) has argued that feminist men deal with a “gender limbo” and balance between being neither too masculine nor too feminine. This has also been touched upon in studies indicating that feminist men are perceived as feminine and thereby risk losing their social status as men (Gundersen & Kunst 2019). Moreover, in some contexts, feminist men are even seen as a stigma (Anderson 2009; Kimmel 1998; Breen & Karpinski 2008; Rudman, Mescher, & Moss-Racusin, 2013; Precopio & Ramsey 2017). Consequently, I asked the interviewees how they experience themselves as men in their feminist settings. However, only one shared experiences of ambivalence or uncertainty with regards to his masculinity—David. He recounted a couple of situations from when he had just started to identify as feminist, where he had enacted “a masculine jargon” and immediately had become unsure of whether the jokes he had told had been too “masculine” and “gender stereotypical”. David related this masculine jargon to his own masculinity and indicated that he had found it unsettling. Even so, these experiences were not told in a way that they indicated a lasting disorientation. Instead, David emphasised that he still told a lot of jokes—albeit different ones—and pointed out that nowadays he was quick to reprimand others who told “sexist jokes”. This is the sole example from the interviews where the interviewee indicated an uncertainty towards his own masculinity. More often, the interviewees shared stories that emphasised the opposite: as was the case with Caspian. He described a recent experience where he had insisted on buying a jacket from the women’s collection, even when the salesgirl stressed that he could find what were, in her opinion, more suitable options in the men’s collection. “This is a part of feminism as well,” Caspian concluded, “questioning preconceptions and the norms we have [in society]. So, this became a small everyday exercise in what it really means being a male feminist.” In contrast to much previous research, then, rather than indicating an ambivalence, uncertainty or implying a gender vertigo/limbo, the interviewees articulate an assuredness. Now, one could ask if this derives from the interviewees being assured with regards to their own masculinity, or in their identity as feminists. I would argue that it is not a case of either-or. Rather, the interviewees articulate an assuredness about being men and feminists. They thereby also challenge the idea of men and feminism as an oxymoron (e.g. Kahane 1998), and instead perform men and feminism as a logical position.

This assuredness among the interviewees has to be understood with the national context in mind. The significance of gender equality as a national political project in Sweden during the last 50 years has been discussed extensively (e.g. Kjellberg 2013; Hill 2014; Egeberg Holmgren 2011). The success of this political project and a self-image as a progressive and equal nation has also been supported by various international polls measuring nations' levels of equality (Dagens Nyheter 2018). Feminism has played an important part in Sweden's national politics since the mid-1990s. In 1996, Vänsterpartiet (The Left Party) became the first political party to introduce feminism in their party program; and by the turn of the millennium, there was a surge of male politicians publicly declaring themselves as feminists (Dahlerup 2004). In 2005, Feministiskt Initiativ (Feminist Initiative) formed as a political party based on feminism as its political foundation and goal. And in 2014, Socialdemokraterna (The Social Democrats) and Miljöpartiet (The Green Party) announced that they were forming the first feminist government in the world (Sveriges Radio 2014). This national context might have shaped the interviewees' ideas of masculinity to such an extent that they, in the context of feminism, have not found themselves in a disorienting position. With the centrality of feminism in national politics in mind, we may even think that the idea of men as feminists is perceived as something completely natural in Sweden. My interview with Fredrik seemed to confirm this. He stated that he had never once been questioned by others about being a man and a feminist, though he reflected this might have to do with his social background and him mostly associating with like-minded people. Other interviewees reported that feminism is still a controversial subject for many, not least in the eyes of men, and that it could be stigmatising for young men like themselves to be openly feminist (Caspian; Henrik). The interviewees also related the presence of a strong anti-feminist movement in recent years, which I will return to. Still, this did not seem to cause them any disorientation with regards to being men and feminists. To some extent, then, my study departs from Egeberg Holmgren's (2011 & 2007) analysis on feminist men in Sweden. She argues that masculinity and feminism are understood as contradictory and that one way of passing as man and feminist is to occupy a rebellious position and perform a symbolic gender suicide, i.e. trying to abolish one's masculinity (Egeberg Holmgren 2007). The radical character of this line of thought is nowhere to be found in my interviews. Rather, the reminders of feminism being a controversial subject in Sweden—especially for men—could be interpreted as a backdrop used by the interviewees in order to emphasise their own 'authentic' assuredness as men and feminists.

As we will see below, this assuredness does not mean that the interviewees haven't also sought to refine their ways of being men. Based on the interviews, then, an assuredness in identifying as man and feminist can still bring with it

uncertainties and experiences of disorientation which we will begin to explore in the next subsection, where I ask how the interviewees experience the feedback they get within their feminist settings.

*A Pedestal Effect?*

A reason for feminist men's ambivalence and uncertainty, highlighted in recent research, is the question of male privilege and a "pedestal effect", meaning that men engaged in feminism or gender equality work get disproportionate rewards (Flood 2005; Messner 2011; Linder & Johnson 2015; Macomber 2015; Peretz 2018). Men's engagement in feminism can thus lead to paradoxical effects. When I asked the interviewees how they felt they were being received in their respective feminist settings, several of them explained that they were often appreciated and rewarded with "cred", to the point where it sometimes made them uneasy:

Erik—Well, a substantial problem is that in some [feminist] groups it can be real easy to be a guy and a feminist. [...] You get rewarded for certain behaviours. Then it is really important to have integrity and to be honest with yourself. And this can actually be really difficult. But you have to stand up and not be a hypocrite. It's not about getting credit and being 'the best feminist'. It's about actually doing something. It's not about being an intellectual and wearing [feminism as] a pin on your jacket. It's about tactics and action.

Later in our interview, Erik speculated that even if he tried to stay alert to being rewarded for being a feminist man, he could not be sure that he had not experienced any privileges. To some extent, then, tackling experiences of "a pedestal effect" is apparent also among these interviewees. However, as in the quote above, Erik and the other interviewees were quick to replicate that they did not let this stop their feminist engagement. In Erik's words, they all indicated that what is important is to "actually do something".

Nonetheless, "actually doing something" seemed to entail a fair amount of ambivalence and uncertainty. How could the interviewees do something and, at the same time, be sure that they did not take up space from women in a problematic way, and that they did not say and do the wrong thing (c.f. Egeberg Holmgren & Hearn 2009:408-409)? These were questions that all interviewees seemed to ask themselves, or had dealt with to a great extent. This was most apparent in my interview with Ingemar:

Ingemar—Something that I'm afraid of, honestly speaking, is to be classified as a 'bad feminist'. Of course, this could have something to do

with me having bad self-confidence and stuff like that [laughs].

Robin—What do you mean with ‘bad feminist’?

Ingemar—It’s making missteps or that I do something that is ‘objectively’ not good. When, in actuality, all I want to do is to show that I’m an ally. [...] But this is a really tough question. It also comes back to this “can guys be feminists?” Many think that guys should just stay quiet in some debates because “this is about women!”

The ambivalence and uncertainty that Ingemar shared was phrased differently by a couple of the other interviewees. Erik and Fredrik both talked about having learnt that being a man and a feminist was not about being afraid of being a “bad feminist”—as well as not striving to be a “good” feminist—but rather, as they stressed, to realise that as men they “are not the political subjects of the feminist struggle.” Thus, the interviewees did not share any experiences that suggested a so-called gender limbo or gender vertigo. But the fact that they are gendered as men, by themselves and others, still brings with it experiences of disorientation (c.f. Egeberg Holmgren 2007). Ahmed (2006:159) writes, “[i]n simple terms, disorientation involves becoming an object”. In this context, this can be phrased in the following terms: disorientation for these young men does not seem to be a result of how they (as subjects) perceive themselves as feminist men, but rather a consequence of simply being men (and therefore objects) in feminism. Even if the interviewees articulate what I above discussed as an assuredness, they also seem to experience disorientation as men and feminists—their position as men and feminists becomes a struggle between simultaneously being subjects and objects. Furthermore, this means, as we shall learn in the following, that even if the interviewees articulate themselves as assured feminist men, they have still reflected deeply on themselves as men and sought to refine their masculinities.

### *Softening Journeys: Self-reflexivity and Emotional Work*

When touching upon feelings of disorientation, all interviewees stressed that being a man in a feminist setting meant that they had become highly reflective and self-conscious. The topic of self-reflection has been highlighted in previous research on men and feminism (e.g. Burrell & Flood 2019). It was also the most recurring topic in the interviews. Caspian explained that he had been in a constant “process of learning” and a “process of personal development” since the start of his feminist engagement. This had resulted, he concluded, in him “being careful”. Fredrik talked about his feminist engagement as “a journey” where he not only

had reflected on himself and his place in feminism, but also about the structural differences of society, ideas about masculinity and femininity in general, as well as how his feminist engagement related to all this. Like Caspian, Fredrik clarified that these reflections had made him cautious about what he says and what he does, not only in his feminist setting but in general. Other interviewees also touched on the importance of being careful and cautious as a man in a feminist setting and emphasised that this had given birth to more sensitivity and perceptivity (David; Ghassan). This seemed to go hand in hand with also trying to develop one's emotional repertoire for a couple of the interviewees. Henrik described it this way: "I would say that in general [I've become better at] talking about my emotions. [...] Previously I didn't have, how should I put it, a particularly elaborate emotional life." As discussed by Sam de Boise and Jeff Hearn (2017), research on men and masculinities has suggested that men repress their emotions rather than explore and seek to understand them. However, de Boise and Hearn also emphasise that emerging research highlights that men actually tend to have an active understanding of their emotions, and try to be more emotional. This has been discussed in terms of a "softening masculinity", i.e. men having an increased capacity to express and to explore their emotional lives (de Boise & Hearn 2017).

The emphasis on self-reflection, sensitivity and carefulness by this article's interviewees strengthens the idea of a softening masculinity, at least among young men. Furthermore, from this discussion on emotions and reflexivity I would like to elaborate on two points. Firstly, the experiences and stories told by the interviewees are, to some extent, contradictory. When being asked whether they have felt the need to change or shape their own masculinity due to their engagement as feminists, the answer was—more often than not—simply no. However, the interviewees also spoke about their engagement in feminism as reflexive journeys where they have felt the need to shape their ways of being young men, particularly in relation to other men. Thus, the interviewees seem to separate their own masculinity into two perspectives: (1) their own ideas and perceptions of their masculinity—a perspective from which they articulate an assuredness—and (2) the actuality of being a (young) man in a feminist setting—a perspective from which they articulate a need for a gender refining. Contradictory or not, these two perspectives seem to allow the interviewees to experience themselves as oriented, and, at the same time, as disoriented and in need of seeking new ways of being (feminist) men.

Secondly, I found a clear difference in how the interviewees talked about their reflexivity, carefulness and sensitivity. The interviews with David and Ingemar in many ways highlighted aspects of what Ahmed calls disorientation. The ways in which they talked about their experiences produced the impression that they were not feeling at home in their feminist settings. What brought these



two interviewees together was that David and Ingemar were both newcomers in their feminist settings. They seemed to have not yet found their way and were very much in the process of learning and reflecting. The other seven interviewees used the same words and phrases as David and Ingemar, and talked about the same experiences and shared the same thoughts. However, they produced an entirely different feeling. They related the difficulties and uncertainties of being feminist men in the past tense, that they had been through the reflexive journey. Thereby, they gave the impression of having arrived. This is exemplified in the interview with Ghassan:

When I first became a feminist, or when I first became interested in these questions, I realized that I actually had a skewed relationship with women. And by that I don't mean sexually or in [romantic] relationships... I'm talking about my relationship with women as friends, as acquaintances. I started to realise that I hadn't seen them in the same way as men. Or rather, I hadn't treated them in the same way as I treated men. And then it became very important to change that. That has been a process. I'm still watchful about whether or not I've really succeeded, but I would definitely say I have become better at it.

Ahmed emphasises that orientation is not only a spatial question but also a question of temporality. She writes, "After all, to acquire a direction takes time [...] it is by following some lines more than others that we might acquire our sense of who it is that we are" (2006:20). The temporality of orientation seems to be highly significant also for the interviewees and their experiences of feminist engagement. The duration of time enables a feeling of being at home in feminism. Or, phrased differently, the interviewees use temporal continuity and the past tense to articulate a homely feeling when talking about themselves as feminists.

Drawing on the interviews then, being a young Swedish man in a feminist setting entails both experiences of assuredness as well as disorientation, particularly when being new in the feminist context. This is highlighted by the individual journeys of reflection, towards being more sensitive and careful. These processes illuminate how the interviewees have dealt with deviation as a result of them being men in a feminist context. In a way, then, the interviewees' reflexive journeys can also be understood as ways of reorientation, of trying to feel at home. However, this only informs us how the young men experience themselves as *being* in a feminist context. It does not tell us about the *doing*, the practical aspects of being politically engaged and how these young men act and engage as feminists. Hence, in the following I focus on how the interviewees reorient themselves and

act as political agents in a context where they do not define themselves as the political subjects.

## Reorientations

The interviewees talked at length about being practical and about “actually doing something” as feminists. Studying this, I found four recurring themes, or four different ways in which they seemed to reorient themselves in their feminist settings. In the following, I will go through these one by one. As we shall see, the interviewees’ reorientations vary from cleaning coffee cups to articulating themselves as, what I call, historical actors.

### *Doing Political Housekeeping*

When I asked the interviewees about what they were doing practically in their feminist settings, I learnt that three of the nine interviewees held the position of treasurer in their organisations, which I found surprising. Up until that point, these interviewees had talked at length about the importance of feminism as an ideological setting where progressive ideas are harboured and nurtured. Their roles as treasurers seemed like a contrast, as it mainly concerns keeping track of (the not so ideological) digits. However, when I studied the interviews, I found that working in the background was something in common among many of the interviewees. Ghassan explained that as a feminist he had taken up a more and more withdrawn position—although he also talked about still being highly extrovert in some situations, something I will get back to—and he had found it increasingly important to think and act “strategically”. This meant that he had learnt to consider feminism and politics as “a team game” and had thereby found pleasure in working on logistics, i.e. getting the right people involved in the right questions and debates, rather than taking up this space himself. Fredrik talked about “the organization’s infrastructure” and explained, “This is really about the question, what is men’s role in the feminist struggle? Well, I think that booking trips for a girl who is going to give a lecture might give a pretty good score. That’s a suitable place [for me as a man].” Adrian shared thoughts along the same line, albeit about everyday stuff placed even further in the background:

Well, if we’ve had a meeting and everyone has had coffee and then everybody just leaves, it is guaranteed that one of the girls will feel responsible [to do the dishes] and not one of the guys. That’s stuff we [as feminist men] think about and that is something we take care of, right. [...] It is important to think about this stuff and actually make a difference in everyday life.

By emphasising strategical work, the organization's infrastructure and the importance of taking care of everyday stuff, the interviewees articulate a path of reorientation that I, inspired by sociologist Sara Kalm's (2019) discussion on academic housekeeping, label as *political housekeeping*. Since housekeeping is traditionally gendered as feminine (Ambjörnsson 2019), taking care of the everyday stuff—cleaning coffee cups or booking trips for others—becomes an ideologically motivated practice. This organizational background position also seems to enable the interviewees to justify their position as men *and* feminists:

Erik—I think it is much easier to be a feminist [as a guy] in an organization because then there is stuff that you can do. Otherwise it becomes about “Hey, look how smart I am, check out my [feminist] identity” or something like that, asserting [an identity], rather than asserting oneself politically or by acting collectively. [...] I think it would have been really difficult being unorganised as a guy.

Erik put the opportunity to do political housekeeping in relation to what has been labelled as “the pedestal effect” in previous research by declaring that it is too easy to get “very positive” feedback as a feminist man. Doing political housekeeping thereby becomes a way of not being “an eye-servant” and not getting credit just for exhibiting a feminist identity on Instagram, he explained. The reorientation towards doing political housekeeping is thus not only articulated as a suitable practice for the interviewees as *men* doing feminism, but also as a path that legitimises and separates them from (the idea of) other men who are not inclined to do work that is outside of the spotlight. As discussed by social anthropologist Fanny Ambjörnsson (2019), housekeeping, such as cleaning, has often been disregarded and seen as a trifling practice. Hence, housekeeping in many ways is, and has been, invisible: something that was questioned in the second wave feminism with the slogan “the personal is political”. However, for men—who in a sense are “hypervisible” in a feminist context (Messner et al. 2015:149)—the reorientation towards taking care of housekeeping in feminist settings builds on it remaining invisible and, in a sense, disregarded. Otherwise, feminist men will risk being put on a pedestal for doing work that women have been doing all the time without receiving any credit.

### *Doing Feminism for Men*

Returning to the interview with Ghassan, he not only stressed that he had found it increasingly important to regard feminism as “a team game”, which during this part of our interview seemed to entail taking a step back to try and help with strategy and logistics, but also that the further he had gotten in reflecting about

himself as a man in a feminist setting, the more extroverted had he become as a feminist. He explained that this was down to two reasons. First, people in his feminist party found him useful as an alibi: “Just because I’m a guy, I can be much more effective as, how should I say it, a feminist ‘preacher’ [because] I become an alibi so that [my political party] isn’t seen as men haters”. Second, “it has very much to do as well with the fact that many men don’t want to listen to girls”. He continued:

I’ll take an example from when I was doing campaign work. If a group of people comes up to us to talk, I always try to talk to the guy. Others appreciate this as well, I mean others from the party, since it is a more efficient use of our resources, and since the majority in our organization are women, right. So, I very often find myself having to deal with questions relating to men and having to make all the conversations with men. [...] In a way you are forced to be a lot more man-focused, I would say.

Listening to Ghassan, it seemed apparent that his experience of being a man in a feminist setting cleared a certain path for how he can practice feminism. Studying the other interviews, I found support for this interpretation. Fredrik explained that he been working a lot with “internal feminism” for groups of men in his political party in which they had discussed questions on gender roles and master suppression techniques. Furthermore, he emphasised that he was doing workshops for men on the topic of men and feminism. Bashir also talked about doing workshops for other men, albeit not as part of, but outside his feminist setting:

Well, I’ve been doing “guy’s dinners” with several in my [football] team. There’s a concept I really like, created by [the organizations] Make Equal and the Equality Foundation, with conversation guides on topics such as masculinity, love, sex, sensitivity and egocentrism, for example. [...] I invited five or six of them at a time, and I had prepared snack foods. We started talking about masculinity, and we used some of the questions from the guide. But the guide tends to be very serious and very profound right from the off, and I felt that that wouldn’t work. So, I made my own little concept, with a couple of my own questions to begin with.

When Bashir talked about his guy’s dinners, he was enthusiastic, as this had been a direction that enabled him to be a feminist actor, someone actually doing something. With the above examples in mind, doing feminism for men, what I call

*men-feminism*, seems to be a fruitful reorientation for feminist men, one that also results in appreciation from others (e.g. Flood 2005). However, the reorientation towards doing men-feminism can also bring with it a pressure to act:

Erik—There are so many opportunities to act as a feminist guy, especially in breaking with male solidarity, questioning men's behaviour, or just having a supporting role [towards other men]. So, you can focus on feeling that one's role [as a man] in the feminist struggle is problematic, but the most difficult thing is to actually do something when you have the chance of doing something. That isn't easy. And, of course, if it had been easy, it wouldn't have been so important.

Erik elaborated on this and explained that he often felt “uncomfortable” questioning other men's sexist comments and behaviour and that it was easy to find oneself trying to accommodate the situation, to make it more comfortable by thinking “I can't contradict them every time.” Ingemar talked about the same issue and stressed that he often, in hindsight, felt that he should have questioned other men's behaviour, but that he, at the same time, is afraid of conflict. The reorientation towards doing men-feminism can thus mean feeling pleasure about actually doing something, and, at the same time, it can be highly uncomfortable (c.f. Tarrant 2009:142-146). This is due to an obvious difference in the examples above. The first couple of examples—doing campaign work, workshops and guy's dinners—are temporally and spatially pre-organised practices. They have a set time, place and thematic content, all of which gives the participants—and in particular the initiator—an opportunity to prepare and feel at home with the practice. In contrast, the approach to spot and call out on other men's problematic behaviour builds on reacting to others and to coincidences. This latter practice does not offer the same opportunity for preparation. Hence, it can also bring with it tense and uncomfortable experiences—even if the subject does not find himself in a situation like this or even if he decides not to call out sexist and inappropriate behaviour. Furthermore, reorienting oneself towards doing men-feminism is also to conform to the idea of being, first and foremost, a *man* in a feminist setting, as this reorientation, to some extent, is separatist—something a couple of the interviewees emphasised that they were strongly against (Erik; Fredrik). Others, on the contrary, experienced it as something positive and enabling, a feminist “free zone” and “safe space” for them as men (Adrian; David). All in all, the reorientation towards doing men-feminism seems to be enabling for the interviewees. Here is something they can do as men *and* feminists. However, it is a multifaceted practice that brings with it both pleasure and appreciation, as well as the pressure to act and experiences of (possibly) being uncomfortable. Seen

in relation to political housekeeping, doing men-feminism can be regarded as a complementary practice that is not (only) carried out in the background but also can take place on the political stage, such as during campaign work.

### *Doing Theory*

When reflecting upon their feminist engagement, all interviewees talked about the importance of theory and the impact that theory has had on them as feminists. The importance of theory for feminist men has been a recurring theme in previous research (e.g. Egeberg Holmgren 2011). In some cases, men's participation in contentious theoretical discussions have been highlighted as highly inappropriate, and that "it is not men's place to make claims about which direction the women's movement should take" (Burrell & Flood 2019:239). Whether or not this is the case, the experiences shared by the interviewees contradicts this. First and foremost, theory for them seemed like an appropriate opportunity to take up space, to talk and to share their thoughts in their respective feminist settings:

Caspian—Well, you want to qualify your claims. That is important, especially if you feel somewhat unsure about your own position. I read somewhere, a thing about women on boards of directors, about tactics they used to be able to take up space and be heard. And that was about taking a seat where the chairman can see you, and to be damn well prepared so that when you say something there is weight behind it. And I actually think in the same way when I feel a little insecure about my own position in the room.

Using women in high positions as an example, Caspian indirectly emphasised that studying feminist theory meant that he could "qualify" his thoughts and give "weight" to his words. The knowledge of feminist theory, becomes a way to legitimise your place as a man in a feminist setting. This, in turn, seemed to build on a distinction between theory and lived experience. As Adrian put in, "there is a clear difference in discussing feminist theories and discussing lived experiences and problem formulations and such." Henrik touched on the same subject and stressed that it is important that women have the "interpretative prerogative" in feminism as they are the ones having to deal with "everyday sexism and the gender power order". This meant that he usually will not talk about his own experiences, but, as he phrased it, "on the other hand, I can connect the experiences of others to structural theories." Thus, the distinction between theory and lived experiences opens up a path of reorientation for feminist men where they can voice their thoughts and thereby act as feminists. Furthermore, as Caspian emphasised in the quote above, studying theory is also a practice of preparation—being "damn

well prepared”—meaning a practice that he himself can organise, both temporally and spatially. Thereby, theory becomes a path towards feeling at home within feminism.

Discussing her interviews with Swedish feminist men, Linn Egeberg Holmgren (2011:96) writes that she found it difficult to get them to talk about their experiences and feelings: “When such stories came up, they seemed full of theoretically informed reflexivity, that is, the interviewees used theory to analyse what they were telling” (my translation). This was something I experienced as well, at least during parts of the interviews, as the interviewees sometimes seemed more comfortable in describing things as they theoretically could be understood, rather than how they felt about it. However, I would argue that this reluctance to focus on their own lived experiences can be seen in relation to the distinction between experience and theory, and therefore as a strategy to articulate themselves as feminists from the position of being men. Furthermore, it can also be interpreted in relation to the discussion above on being both a subject and an object in feminism. Sharing one’s experiences of being a man and a feminist means focusing, in part, on how it feels to be perceived as a possibly deviating object. Talking about theory and one’s ability to take place in theoretical discussions, on the other hand, becomes a way of articulating oneself as a political subject.

The distinction between lived experiences and theory enables a path of reorientation for feminist men. Nevertheless, when one of the interviewees elaborated on the importance of reading theory, he also highlighted that he was aware of this distinction and that it was important to problematise it:

Fredrik—There are obviously some experiences you will never have [as a guy]. But there are still some sorts of lived experiences, or should I say life reflections, that are really relevant and very important. So, I think it is a bad way forward for guys to only read books on feminism, and blogs, without implementing it to your own life. I mean, a really big part of the real potential for change with feminism is [changing] our social relationships. Or like this, it is not a kind of knowledge that you can get immersed into yourself and then you are done and then you are a perfect feminist and an equal man. But rather, it is a change that happens through long-term work and through experiences as well.

The importance of “implementing” the feminist theories and the knowledge earned through reading, and applying it on yourself was something all interviewees stressed.<sup>3</sup> They also, explicitly, related their reorientations towards theory to their respective reflexive journeys, i.e. using theory as a reflexive tool. Hence, this reorientation is not only a practice that the subject can organise in a specific time

and place, but also a practice that the subject can organise *over* time. Both with regards to the practical knowledge inherent in theory, which is taking a step back and viewing experiences and single incidents in relations to societal structures and to overall explanation models, as well as a practice to be temporally organised in the long-term, the reorientation towards theory offers distance—spatially, i.e. from themselves and their own experiences of being men and feminists in a particular setting, as well as temporally, i.e. from being feminist men in a particular present. This function of a temporal distance seemed to be important for the interviewees, and it is something I wish to pursue even further when exploring the fourth and last reorientation.

### *Being History's Actors*

The reorientation towards theory took us quite some way from practical everyday doings, such as cleaning coffee cups or booking trips. Instead, I argue that it builds on producing a distance and a more abstract perspective. This fourth reorientation takes us even further in that direction as the interviewees also used temporality and distance, in the form of articulations of the present, to reorient themselves as, what I would like to call, *historical actors*. This was done in two ways by the interviewees. First, by articulating a distinction between different generations of men. One of the interviewees who did this was David: “I think that our generation might have found it a bit easier to address these questions [i.e. feminism] than previous generations.” Caspian and Adrian made the same generational distinction. They emphasised that the differences were due to them having grown up in a context and society where feminism had been a recurring political topic and where the male role had been questioned and challenged. They had, as Caspian put it, been “shaped by different experiences, a different history, a different context and luggage” compared to older generations. Adrian stressed that previous generations of men had not been influenced enough by feminism and ideas of gender equality before it was too late: “It seems like there is some sort of senility that kicks in when you get old enough. I don’t know really, but I hope that I’ll never get there, that I have reached some kind of awareness so that I won’t get to that stage.” Other interviewees touched on the same generational division and societal changes, but they also described it as a change within feminism, where more emphasis had been placed on, as Fredrik put it, “the individual and the social level” rather than on economic and materialistic differences between the sexes, which, in effect, had made feminism less reluctant towards men:

Fredrik—The feminism of our generation is maybe a bit more kind in its views on the male gender. I mean, if you look for someone to tell you that “It is okay to be a man and a feminist”, it is real easy to find someone



who will tell you that in Sweden today. I think that might be an... well, this is speculation, but the idea that the male gender must cease to exist was probably a more common standpoint [within feminism] during the 70s.

The generational distinction between a younger and an older generation was explained in different, albeit correlating, ways. I argue that the articulation of a generational divide between “we” (young men) and “them” (older generations of men) can be analysed as a use of the past. Older generations of men become a representation of things past, a past when men and feminism rightfully could be described as an oxymoron. On the other hand, the “we”—as in young men—becomes a representation of a present distinctly different from the past. With this generational distinction, the interviewees reorient themselves in time by making the equation men-and-feminism-in-the-present as less oxymoronic, and less disorienting. In effect, their position as subjects within feminism becomes more homelike.

Secondly, the interviews were cluttered with remarks of what Erik called an “anti-feminist mobilisation” of the present. In Ingemar’s words, the present is characterised by growing forces that “want to destroy everything we’ve fought for”. The interviewees also referred to “problematic male figures” advocating “problematic male values”. They talked about an online hatred towards feminism—especially due to male online commentators being hostile and aggressive (Caspian; Bashir; Erik). Ghassan seemingly concluded these thoughts: “right now everything looks pretty dark politically.” Listening to the interviewees, the present seems to be a difficult time for feminism and that men, in particular, are repressive. When the interviewees, in contrast, talked about feminism, it was described in terms such as “a fight against injustices and inequality” (Fredrik), as an endeavour to “take care of each other” and as something that “actually benefits us as human beings” (Caspian). Feminism was hereby stressed as a light of humanity in a politically dark and problematically masculine time. During our interview, Fredrik elaborated on these thoughts and placed them in a historical perspective: “Throughout the history of feminism, men have primarily been a repressive force. This is absolutely the most common role [for men], both historically and today. Men try to destroy it.” Hence, by articulating an ongoing fight between feminism and repressive forces of (a problematic) masculinity, the interviewees not only emphasise themselves as politically progressive but also as history’s actors on the side of feminism. This, I argue, can be understood as a reorientation insofar as the interviewees use history—a relationship between the past, the present and the future—to produce legitimacy for feminist men as actors distinctly distinguished from an oxymoronic masculinity. Of course, this reorientation is not practical

in the same sense as the aforementioned reorientations towards political housekeeping, men-feminism or even towards theory. Based on the interviews, however, the use of temporality seems to help feminist men to reorient themselves and to produce a homely feeling within the feminist struggle.

## Conclusion

Exploring how young feminist men experience themselves as feminists and how they (re)orient themselves in their feminist settings, this article has shown that being a man in a feminist setting is a complex and somewhat disorienting position. To some degree, then, the article is reiterating findings from previous studies on the subject—such as the risk of a pedestal effect (e.g. Peretz 2018), the emphasis on self-reflexivity (e.g. Burrell & Flood 2019) and the importance of being theoretically informed (e.g. Egeberg Holmgren 2011). However, the analysis also sheds new light on the topic of men and feminism. Even though the interviewees shared experiences of disorientation, reflexivity and carefulness, they also articulated an assuredness in their position as men *and* feminists. The position as man and feminist is still to be considered as “a border land position” (Egeberg Holmgren 2011:13). But, in contrast to previous research, the analysis shows no indications of “gender vertigo” or “gender limbo” among the interviewees (Connell 1995; Hedenus 2005). Connected with this, I have highlighted that the interviewees separate their experiences of being men and feminists into two perspectives: firstly, their perception of themselves as *subjects*—a perspective from which they articulate assuredness—and, secondly, their experiences of being gendered as men and thus as somewhat deviating *objects* in their feminist settings – which has meant that they have sought to refine their masculinity. The duality of this subject-object distinction means that the interviewees can experience themselves as oriented and “at home” within feminism and, at the same time, admit to feeling the need to adapt and to change in order to fit in.

The analysis has also put focus on what I label as political housekeeping, i.e. reorientations towards taking care of the everyday stuff, such as cleaning coffee cups. This turns “doing the small stuff” into something important and political yet still subtle. Hence, it becomes a suitable path for feminist men. As opposed to Egeberg Holmgren’s (2007) study, then, this article’s interviewees cannot be said to reorient towards radical and rebellious positions, but rather towards a mundane and ordinary background position.

Another contribution concerns the interviewees’ use of history, where they position themselves as legitimate subjects acting for the feminist struggle. With this use of history, the interviewees can seek out a background position, yet they still experience themselves as history’s actors. The use of history, in particular in

the form of articulating a distinction between their own generation and older generations of men, becomes a path of reorientation for the young interviewees in the present. This, however, raises questions on how older generations of feminist men perceive themselves in relation to the history of feminist struggle. This is something yet to be explored.

Overall, the article challenges the idea of men and feminism as an oxymoron (e.g. Kahane 1998). Instead, I argue that feminism can be understood as a process of masculinity construction. Feminism becomes a path of doing a “softer” masculinity (c.f. de Boise & Hearn 2017) which emphasises self-reflection, sensitivity and carefulness. In a time characterised by the interviewees as “repressive” and “politically dark”, feminism seems to offer men an alternative way of exploring and performing masculinity.

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## Notes

1 For an in-depth discussion of these criticisms see Egeberg Holmgren 2011.

2 Quotes have been translated into English by the author. The interviewees are anonymised. The interviews were approved by the interviewees and by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

3 Although I don't pursue this argument here, issues of class and academic background becomes apparent in relation to this discussion on reading and incorporating theory. It might also be relevant to point out that all interviewees, despite their varying backgrounds, had been, or was, studying academic degrees. Thus indicating an acquaintance with theory.

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